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Senate Remarks: The Administration's Dangerous Wartime Rhetoric

The language of diplomacy is imbued with courtesy and discretion. Diplomats the world over can be counted on to choose each word of every public statement with precision, for an ill-received demarche could turn allies into adversaries or cooperation into confrontation.

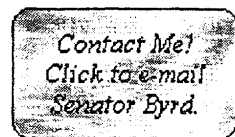
Like most professions, diplomacy has its own lexicon. As John Kenneth Galbraith wrote in 1969, "There are few ironclad rules of diplomacy but to one there is no exception: when an official reports that talks were useful, it can safely be concluded that nothing was accomplished." And when we hear a seasoned envoy refer to a "frank and open discussion," we know that he is actually talking about a knock-down, drag-out fight behind closed doors. While negotiation can steer great powers away from a course that would lead to war, we can usually count on public statements about diplomacy to be underwhelming.

There have been exceptional times when bold statements have energized world opinion. When President Reagan stood on the Berlin Wall in 1987 and proclaimed, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall," he spoke to millions of Germans who longed to be freed from oppression. While I would not go so far as to credit a single phrase with hastening the fall of the Eastern Bloc, certainly President Reagan's statement reflected the resolve of the West to oppose communism.

There have also been a fair number of bold statements to the world that have backfired.

For example, Nikita Khrushchev squandered whatever credit he might have gained through a goodwill tour of the United States in 1959, when he visited the United Nations the next year. The Soviet Premier famously exclaimed to the West, "We will bury you," while slamming his shoe on the table in front of him. This ill-advised outburst was a vivid depiction of an irrational and out of control superpower.

Fortunately, the United States has a tradition in foreign policy of being slow to anger. We have nurtured a reputation of being rational and deliberate. I doubt that Americans would have much tolerance for a president who used the United Nations as a forum for testing the construction of his footwear on the nearest table. It would be a great departure for the United States to use its foreign policy organs as a means



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to spread divisive rhetoric.

Unfortunately, the tone of our foreign policy in recent months has been in a steady decline. To some of our allies, the United States, through its words and its actions on the crisis in Iraq, is beginning to look more like a rogue superpower than the leader of the free world. Many newspapers in European capitals criticize U.S. policy toward Iraq. Moderate Muslim nations, such as Jordan and Turkey, are growing progressively suspicious of American motives in the war against terrorism. An increasing number of people in Arab countries are coalescing around an outright hatred of the United States.

Let us remember that President Bush came to office promising to change the tone in Washington. I wonder if the current tone of American foreign policy is what he had in mind? One source of alarm is the tone of the National Security Strategy released by the White House in September 2002. In broad strokes, the strategy argues that the United States should use its overwhelming military power to engage in preemptive strikes to prevent others from ever developing the means to threaten our country. The strategy notes a preference for working with allies to keep the peace, but underscores the willingness of the United States to act unilaterally.

The content and the tone of these important pronouncements in the National Security Strategy sparked outcry, in the United States and around the world. The report gave critics plenty of ammunition to make their case that the United States is a 400 pound gorilla that will stop at nothing to get its way. Our strategy leaves much of the world the impression that Americans agree with the quotation of the late Chinese leader, Zhou Enlai, which turned the axiom uttered by the military strategist Carl von Clausewitz on his head: "All diplomacy is a continuation of war by other means."

There are many examples of provocative rhetoric that have escalated the stakes of our standoff with Iraq. In his 2002 State of the Union Address, the President coined an "Axis of Evil," comprised of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. In October 2002, the White House Press Secretary suggested that regime change in Iraq could be accomplished with "the cost of one bullet." On December 30, 2002, President Bush said that Saddam's "day of reckoning is coming." The next day, he chided a reporter who asked about the prospect of war in Iraq by saying, "I'm the person who gets to decide, not you." The President's coarse words did nothing to ease criticism of American unilateralism.

Several members of the President's national security team warned Iraq in January 2003 that "time is running out" for Iraq, and that such time was measured in weeks, not months. On Sunday talk show interviews on January 29, the White House Chief of Staff refused to rule out the use of nuclear weapons in a war against Iraq. On February 6, President Bush ominously declared that "the game is over." With each of these statements, the chances of war appeared to grow.

To be fair, the President and his advisors have repeatedly stated a preference for the peaceful disarmament of Iraq. But as I speak right now, many Americans believe that war is inevitable. Through words and

through action, the United States appears to be on a collision course with war in the Persian Gulf. Stating a preference for a peaceful solution is not enough to alter the heading of our great ship of state.

If our rhetoric toward Iraq is not alarming enough, the last weeks have seen an appalling increase in criticism of our allies and the United Nations.

On September 12, 2002, President Bush delivered a strong and effective speech that urged the United Nations to take action to disarm Iraq. The President said: "All the world now faces a test, and the United Nations [faces] a difficult and defining moment. Are Security Council resolutions to be honored and enforced, or cast aside without consequence? Will the United Nations serve the purpose of its founding, or will it be irrelevant?"

The President threw down the gauntlet, and the United Nations acted. Inspectors have returned to Iraq, and they are doing their job. The inspectors have asked for more time, but the President has now challenged the U.N. to authorize the use of force, or again face irrelevance. The world is now wondering, which is the greater threat to the relevance of the U.N.: a rogue nation that flaunts the will of the international community; or a permanent member of the Security Council that views the institution as useless unless it submits to its will? This hand has been overplayed. More threats of U.N. irrelevance will only portray the United States as a bully superpower.

European allies who do not share our view on the crisis in Iraq have recently been in the cross hairs for verbal bombardment. Secretary Rumsfeld has lumped Germany in with Libya and Cuba as the principal opponents of war in Iraq. He also characterized Germany and France as being "Old Europe," as if their economic and political power does not matter as compared to the number of Eastern countries that comprise New Europe.

Richard Perle, a senior advisor to the Department of Defense, has also had choice words about our European allies. In October 2002, Mr. Perle recommended that German Chancellor Schroeder resign in order to improve relations between our two countries. On January 30, Mr. Perle followed up this charge by saying: "Germany has become irrelevant. And it is not easy for a German chancellor to lead his country into irrelevance." Spreading his criticism around, Mr. Perle stated that "France is no longer the ally that it once was." So far as I can tell from press reports, Mr. Perle, who is the Chairman of the Defense Policy Board, has not been admonished for his inflammatory statements.

Such vindictive criticism of our European allies has had repercussions. According to a new poll, published in the Financial Times Deutschland on February 10, 57 percent of Germans agree with the statement, "The United States is a nation of warmongers." And now we find ourselves in a pointless stalemate with our NATO partners over military assistance for Turkey. If we had been more temperate in our rhetoric, perhaps we could have worked through the anti-American tone of the recent elections in Germany. Instead, we find ourselves escalating a war of words against two great European powers.

How we communicate our foreign policy makes a difference. We expect North Korea or Iraq to use inflammatory propaganda to speak to the world, but we are a more dignified nation. There are ways for our country to indicate resolve without resorting to bellicosity. The subtext to nearly every new White House statement on Iraq is that the United States has run out of patience. The Administration is signaling its willingness to use an extreme amount of military force against Iraq when many still question the need to do so. We need to change our tone.

Impetuous rhetoric has added fuel to the crisis with Iraq and strained our alliances. Before committing our nation to war with Iraq and the years of occupation that will surely follow, we should repair the damage to our relations with our allies. I urge the President to change the tone of our foreign policy -- to turn away from threatening Iraq with war, away from insulting our friends and allies, away from threatening the United Nations with irrelevance. Our rhetoric has gone over the top, from giving an indication of our strength to giving an indication of recklessness.

I have learned from fifty years in Congress that it is unwise to insult one's adversaries, for tomorrow you may be in need of an ally. There will come the day when we will seek the assistance of those European allies with which we are now feuding. But serious rifts are threatening our close relationship with some of the great powers of Western Europe. The Secretary of State said yesterday that NATO is at risk of breaking up. It is time to put our bluster and swagger away for the time being. I urge the President to calm his rhetoric, repair our alliances, and slow the charge to war.

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